

October 5th, 2008, 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Psalm 19 VU page 740-741,

A GIFT FROM GOD

A friend of mine told me a story about visiting with her three year old niece. At one point in the evening, my friend told her niece “No” when she asked if she could do something. The niece promptly replied “Let’s negotiate!”. Three years old! I’ve heard the same kind of thing from my 6 year old niece, for whom the word “No” seems to be a foreign word. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard my sister say, “Tayah, this is not up for negotiation!” It also reminds me of my high school English teacher who, when some of his students decided to debate some of the class rules, would respond, “This classroom is not a democracy!”

We really don’t like rules very much in our present society. The anti-authoritarian teenagers of the 60s have grown up to become baby boomer individualists, who have in turn given birth to the “Me” generations – generations of people who put individual rights ahead of collective responsibility. Rules smack of top-down, hierarchical power structures that makes us balk – we see them as arbitrary limits to our freedom. We don’t like the word “NO” anymore than a three or six year old would. So it’s probably hard for us to look at something like the law of God and understand what a precious gift it is.

Listen to the language of Psalm 19: God’s law, precepts, commandments, statutes are sweet, rich, pure, perfect, rejoice the heart, make wise the simple, enlighten the eyes, endure forever. God’s law – God’s covenant with the Hebrew people and we who have been grafted into that covenant – God’s law is a gift to guide wandering feet and to lead the wondering soul.

Jewish people do not see law as a burden. In fact, the story of the Israelite people places the giving of the law squarely within the developing relationship between God and this nomadic people. You see, Moses was being besieged by people who wanted guidance from him to settle disputes and live according to God’s will. First Moses set up judges from among the people to help deal with minor disputes. Then God initiated a further provision: to clearly tell the people the basic ground-rules for their relationship. There were a lot of other rules as well, but these are the basis of the rest.

The Ten Commandments are about how God and the people will live in relationship, and how the people will be in relationship with each other. They’re kind of like the ground-rules you set up at the beginning of a marriage. Different couples have different ground rules, but some of the ones I’ve heard are: “I’d rather hear an uncomfortable truth than a comfortable lie – we won’t lie to each other”; or “I can handle you going out with your buddies but please don’t drink to excess or drink and drive”; or “It’s OK if you smoke if you do it outside”; or “If one of us feels the need for couples-counselling, we’ll do it, whether or not the other feels it’s necessary”; or “If one of us cooks the meal, the other cleans up afterward.” Those are ground-rules that make it possible for us to live together harmoniously. The Ten Commandments teach us how to have a harmonious relationship with God and with each other.

Of course, the law of love always trumps legalism. The apostle Paul, who is sometimes seen as Christianity’s foremost critic of the law, actually argued that the law is useful in that it shows us where we’ve gone wrong. Its usefulness has its limits, Paul would say, because it teaches us our imperfection but does not give us the answer to that imperfection. Only God’s love can do that – God’s love shown to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who lived according to the Spirit of the law – a Spirit that put love ahead of slavish devotion to a rigidly interpreted law.

It’s important to say, though, that the covenant on Mt Sinai is no less a covenant of love than the new covenant in Jesus. Jesus said, as did the Rabbi Gamaliel before him, that all of the law, including the

Ten Commandments, could be summed up in love of God, and love of neighbour. God loves us, and God wants us to return that love with love. That's what those first few commandments are about. If I were to paraphrase them in modern language, they would read something like this:

1. Worship and serve God – God belongs in first place.
2. Don't put anything or anyone that isn't God in first place in your life. Not your job, not your family, not your home, not even your church – God. Make God's priorities your priorities.
3. Don't use God's name casually. Don't use God's name to justify things that are against God's justice and God's love.

The fourth commandment segues between an emphasis on the love of God and the love of neighbour:

4. Take time off to be with God: be still and remember to whom you belong and what life is all about. Give yourself, your employees, your volunteers, your family a rest.

You see, this isn't just about giving time to God, though that's important enough. This commandment is also tied to the human need for rest. This law was given to a people who had been slaves. They knew what it was to work without ceasing, and they knew how important it was to give everyone in their society a break from labour: from the head of the household, to their slaves, to their cattle and donkeys. As Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for human beings", not the other way around.

The fifth commandment calls on the people to honour their parents. (5. Give your parents the respect they deserve.) This is clearly about human relationships, about the need to care for and honour the wisdom of those older than ourselves.

The last five commandments focus on the life of the individual or family within the wider community: the need for truth, honesty, loyalty, and justice in human community.

6. Don't kill anyone, for any reason.
7. Don't have sex with someone else's partner. Broken relationships hurt people, and they hurt God.
8. Don't take anything that doesn't belong to you – that includes no cheating on taxes, no under-the-table deals, no over-charging or under-paying.
9. Don't lie about someone, especially in court. Be honest with yourself and with everyone else.
10. Don't covet what you don't have and what doesn't belong to you. Be content with a simple life.

These are the guidelines, the gift from God that will allow us to be in harmonious relationship with God and with each other. Frederick Buechner points out that they are more than rules for living – they are the rules of life. This is not just how life "Should Be" based on some arbitrary standard, but the way life is. Like the First Law of Thermodynamics, or the law of gravity, this law is the way the world works. It's as if God is saying: "You know that if you put your feet on the ground in the morning, you're not going to float off into mid-air; you know that isn't going to change. Nor is this going to change. This is the way the universe works; this is how human relationships work. Pay attention!"

It's a gift to be told how things work. Have you ever had to re-program a DVD player after a power failure? You know you've done it before, but the five steps to get the clock set properly and get the cable channels re-entered and your favourite shows recorded just are not coming to you. You look all around the house for the instruction manual, until finally you find it at the bottom of your utility drawer, with the empty roll of tape and the hammer that's missing its head. Three minutes later, the DVD player is running as it should. Isn't it great to have it all written down for us? [Centre for Excellence in Preaching, Scott Hoezee]

The maker of the universe has given us an instruction manual for human relationships. If we follow those laws, our relationship with God, and our relationship with one another, will be the better for it. That seems like a pretty good reason to take them seriously, don't you think? Amen.